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Memory and Ministry

Young Adult Nostalgia, Immigrant Amnesia

Brett C. Hoover, C.S.P.

A problem with memory occurs in two ways that directly affect pastoral issues: when we reconstruct our history as a community of faith in a way that romanticizes the past and anathematizes the present (nostalgia) or when we reconstruct the past eliminating crucial information we would rather ignore (amnesia), particular for ministry to and with the young and immigrants. Drawing on J. B. Metz's approach to Christian memory, ministers can engage the dangerous memory in a way that coincides with the needs of young people and our nation's newest residents.

A church of tradition is by definition a church of memory. Yet memory is a precarious thing. As Christians, we remember what the God of Jesus Christ has done for us, and this powerfully impacts how we worship and minister to one another. Even from the beginning, the followers of Jesus knew this. Saint Paul forcefully admonished wealthy Corinthians for behaving badly at the Lord's Supper, concluding his message to them with an invocation of Jesus' memory:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:23-24)

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Such invocations certainly had power to help resolve struggles within the early church, yet we do not know if they necessarily settled the issue.

The past, as always, is open to interpretation. Memory has no direct line to the past, and it plays tricks on us. Recently I rediscovered a college history essay my sister wrote nearly twenty years ago connecting our family history to Ku Klux Klan attacks in Indiana in the 1920s. In the essay, my sister recounted my Methodist grandmother returning home from school one day only to discover a cross burning in front of a Catholic neighbor's home. Upon hearing me tell the story again, my mother said this had in fact happened to her father, not her mother (both are now deceased). We confront similar problems in the New Testament. Luke, in Acts 15, claims Paul and Barnabas had a falling out in Antioch over taking along John Mark on their journey. In Galatians 2, Paul assures us that in Antioch Barnabas betrayed him in the row he and Peter had over the appropriateness of table sharing between Jewish and Greek believers. Bets are on Paul's version (and on my grandfather), but we will likely never know exactly what happened on either day.

Psychological and Theological Opinions

During the twentieth century, scientific research confirmed what most human beings have probably long suspected about the fallibility of human memory. Thus, psychologists no longer argue that memory consists of information imprinted on the brain that we then retrieve; they agree that remembering involves reconstruction (Bartlett). Even many nonpsychologists are familiar with Elizabeth Loftus's famous work on the reconstructive and malleable nature of eyewitness testimony (Loftus). Studies also now show that schemas—customary notions about life and patterns of experience—influence how we commit things to memory (Hirt et al., 63). And both mood and life events at the time of the retrieval process also have a great deal of influence on what we do or do not remember (Bower; Williams et al.; Loftus and Loftus 1980). None of this indicates we cannot accurately remember the past. Memory, however, remains prone to our particularly human tendency of creating the world as we live in it.

While much has been made of the problems this creates for Christianity in terms of the factual historicity of events in the Bible and Christian tradition, I would suggest that the pastoral problems it creates are actually more complex and perhaps of more immediate concern. The historical-critical biblical issue has been a peculiarly modern crisis—wanting to know (and presuming we can know) *what really happened*. More often than we might want to admit, however, faith is not transformed by ascertaining historical details. Knowing with certainty the nature of Paul and Barnabas's disagreement will not change our spiritual lives, and a plurality of explanations within a tradition can often be more of a friend than a foe, offering us multiple voices to speak to different dilemmas and situations in

our lives. Rather, a big problem with memory occurs in two ways that directly affect pastoral issues: when we reconstruct our history as a community of faith in a way that romanticizes the past and anathematizes the present (nostalgia) or when we reconstruct the past eliminating crucial information we would rather ignore (amnesia).

I am not the first to draw attention to either. Much recent work on postmodernity notes that contemporary trends in resistance to modernity—Christian fundamentalism, Catholic “return-to-orthodoxy” movements, Jewish ultra-orthodoxy groups—are not so much manifestations of a premodern mindset as they are attempts to re-envision and reorganize the past as a resource to combat today’s corruption (Lakeland, 11). An 86-year-old Catholic priest remarked to me that the Latin Mass as regularly practiced at a Northern California parish made use of extra flourishes and even vestments not recognizable to him from the years before Vatican II. They had fashioned for themselves an “improved” version of the preconciliar past. Regarding amnesia, over the last forty years, feminist theologians of diverse backgrounds, German political theologians, and liberation theologians from Latin America have attended to what and whom Christian communities conveniently forget, especially as it regards our complicity in grave social sin—patriarchy, the Holocaust (or *Shoah*), and massive social inequality across Latin America. These theologians contrast this cultural amnesia with the ethical responsibilities Jesus’ gospel calls us to—its option for the poor, its demand for human dignity and social justice, its call to practice a discipleship of companionship and equality.

Nostalgia and the Young

During many years spent in young adult ministry, both at the parish and then at the regional and national level, I not only spent a lot of time with young people themselves but also with older adults talking about this vital ministry. I noticed how often older men and women’s opinions on the subject were connected to their potent, reconstructed memories of that stage in their lives. I would quote sociological research on the *permanent* disconnection from the church of significant percentages of people from the postconciliar generations, only to be told that young people always strayed and would always come back when they got married. I would give presentations on the extremely ecumenical marriage habits of young Catholics, only to be asked, “Where do young people go to meet a nice young Catholic girl or boy?”

This should surprise no one. Generational sociologists remind us that the most significant and influential events in a person’s life, publicly and privately, occur during youth and young adulthood. They go a long way toward forming adult identity and collective experience with others our own age. Thus, baby boomers speak of the events of the late 1960s and 70s, and thousands of men and women in

their twenties enlisted in the military in the wake of 9/11. We cannot but be a product (though not a prisoner) of the major events of our young lives. Also quite naturally the presence of young people triggers our memories of this time in our lives.

This can be a positive thing for ministry. After all, many people do not wish to remember and are simply intolerant. On the other hand, adults who remember the emotional volatility of adolescence but no longer find themselves immersed in it can provide stability and security to teenagers seeking identity and faith development. Those who strongly recall their own restless young-adult search for a place in the world will prove patient with young adults' ever-changing worldview while still calling them to greater commitment.

Nevertheless, the limitations of memory already mentioned can provoke severe difficulties for this ministry. With the privilege of years, we look back on our own experience as teens and young adults, conveniently reconstructed from the sea of raw emotion and the contradictions of development. Things were so much different when we were young. Now who has discipline? Young people have no attention span. They know nothing about their faith tradition. Editing our own memories of youth, we easily sit in judgment, especially those of us in pastoral ministry with professional responsibilities for setting a moral tone. I have done this myself. But how true to life are our concerns? How different are the current generations, really? Not long ago I read excerpts from a meeting of Episcopalians vitally concerned about the issue of young adults and the church. There were many declarations about declining moral standards and the changing world, people not knowing how to behave properly. Though the conversation had a contemporary feel, in fact it took place in 1922 (Church Congress 1922; I am grateful to Professor David Gortner for this text and the point about it). In other words, negatively-focused youth nostalgia has been a near constant in addressing young adult ministry for decades.

This narrative of decline may fit our nostalgia better than the facts. The world of young people has changed in multiple ways since 1922, but not consistently for the worse. Moral standards have improved in some areas and declined in others. People in the United States may be less courteous to one another, but they are on average less racially prejudiced. Much is made of today's young adults as the children of divorce, but they are not the first. The divorce rate peaked after World War II, and separation and family desertion was common during the Great Depression (Kellogg and Mintz, 1937–1938). To take another popular index of alleged decline, consider religious education. In reality, it ebbs and flows. In 1922 as now,

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some young people had grown up with a great deal and some had almost none. For Catholics, the Baltimore Catechism, the chief tool of religious education before Vatican II, emphasized rote memorization. Thus, most could repeat certain basic lines but often had no idea what they meant. Religious education today has denser content and more explanation but less reinforcement in the multiple settings around the home, school, and neighborhood. Especially for Euro-Americans, there is no longer immersion in a Christian or Catholic culture. For many Latino/as, migration and cultural adjustment have disrupted settings of reinforcement.

My point is that, in any given generation, a nostalgic narrative of decline often replaces a more complicated accounting for the difference between the past and the present. And such nostalgia has profound ill effects on ministry to young people. Convinced better days have gone by, ministers often just give up on the young. They are long gone, irreligious, a waste of time (instead of just “differently religious,” a term used by the sociologist Jerome Baggett to indicate how approaches to religion change over time). Even if the ministers do not categorically give up, many have such attachment to their own youth that they remain unwilling to listen and learn about the situation of young people today. The gap is too intense; they leave the field of mentoring and guidance to others, convinced such work is for specialists or at least people younger than they. Paradoxically, this increases the generation gap and decreases the salutary effects of intergenerational contact within the church.

Perhaps most powerfully, however, many caught in the throes of nostalgia oppose any form of ministry that does not function as in their day, or at least as they imagine their era to be. This takes many forms. Many who came of age during Vatican II insist on the liberal-conservative continuum created by the council, even though few young people today understand themselves in those terms. Many immigrant parents insist on programs exclusively in their native languages, even as youth customarily speak *both* in English and that language (or a hybrid mix like Spanglish). Euro-American baby boomers often resolutely see young adult ministry in terms of self-exploration and even rebellion, yet many young people have more interest in identity and tradition. Such competing visions of ministry, if too far off the mark, tend to sink outreach entirely.

Amnesia and Immigration in the United States

This issue of the immigrant parents of young adult children, however, raises the other critical pastoral issue regarding memory in ministry—amnesia. Because Euro-American Catholics (and many Protestants as well) see themselves as descendants of immigrants from Europe and believe in the national mythology of the United States as a “nation of immigrants,” they cannot help but view present controversies over ministry to and with immigrants at least partially through that

lens. Comparisons crop up. How does the experience of the current wave of immigrants from Latin America and Asia compare to that of their ancestors? Of course, because immigration from much of Europe was legally curtailed in the 1920s (and demand subsequently lowered by the Great Depression), most white families have little reliable memory of immigration and its impact on their families' lives. Family stories revert to idealized images, stereotyped struggles, building upon missing details. Many of us of Euro-American heritage practice a kind of immigrant amnesia. Only recently, for instance, did I uncover on an extended family website the probability that in the early 1870s two brothers in an ancestor's family were smuggled into the United States while the German Empire barred them from leaving.

In the absence of concrete information, I commonly hear people make negative judgments about current immigrants using “memories” of their own families. Their memories are often quite erroneous when compared with historical documents and statistics. Mistaken impressions people have about their ancestors include that (1) they quickly learned English, (2) they never had bilingual or foreign language schools or resources, (3) they never sent money home overseas, (4) they never had financial assistance from the government or other organizations but succeeded through their own efforts, and (5) almost all European immigrants came to the United States to become Americans and to stay. A more accurate sorting through historical sources demonstrates that, in fact, many European immigrants resisted learning English. Several groups—especially the Germans—had bilingual schools and foreign-language newspapers. Many immigrants, including the Irish, sent large amounts of money back home. In the very beginning though, many required financial assistance from a variety of sources, even occasionally from the government. Not a few European immigrants came to the United States simply to work, departing as soon as they had earned what they wanted. In fact, about half of all Italian and a third of non-Jewish Eastern European immigrants returned home (Zolberg). As a side note, I have also heard many people argue that their ancestors came legally in contrast to many immigrants today, but the United States did not have a category for “illegal immigrant” until 1924. If you made it, you made it. However, as apparently happened in my family generations ago, some people did have to illegally smuggle their children *out* of other countries to the United States.

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Countering these impressions is not meant as an attack on treasured family notions or “bursting bubbles.” Rather, many of us of European immigrant descent share churches with recent immigrants and have influence over whether and how local ministry with them proceeds. Immigrant amnesia has a real effect. In recent field research in a shared parish in a midwestern city, I witnessed firsthand both resistance and generosity toward immigrants among Euro-American parishioners. This had a direct impact on the ease with which immigrant parishioners adapted to life in the United States and their ability to develop a strong parish ministry. Naturally more depends on the work of the immigrant community themselves, but Euro-American Catholics do have the power to block their parish from welcoming an immigrant community or even to express such coldness that people decide they are better off attending an Evangelical or Pentecostal church. More often impatience with immigrants’ patterns of adjustment results in tensions and resentments on both sides. Some Euro-American Catholics feel that people do not learn English and U.S. Catholic customs and practices as quickly as they ought to. Having blocked out the challenges (even horrors) of migration from the family memory, it is easy to have overly high expectations and little compassion. At the same time, especially in formerly homogeneous areas, Euro-American Catholics grieve the changes immigration brings to their parishes. They develop the impression that the U.S. Catholic Church is bending over backwards to minister to Latino/a immigrants, though in fact it may be doing less than it did for their ancestors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After almost eighty years without one, they have largely forgotten what an immigrant church looks like.

Dangerous Memory

Again, raising these complex problems of memory—nostalgia and amnesia—does not come primarily from a concern for honoring the historical truth, however important that might be. A scientific preoccupation with critical history does still occupy our attention, children of the Enlightenment that we are. A “hermeneutic of suspicion,” however, has made us more cautious with our interpretations of the past. Moreover, the concern here is ministry and justice in ministry. This matter of nostalgia and amnesia demonstrates to us that the fallibility of memory is not merely a problem of incorrect details. Rather we alter our recall to suit our own needs, both as a community and as individuals. Very often, as feminist and liberation theologians remind us, this reinforces the power structure as it is. This, as I have tried to argue, creates a pastoral challenge. As accounts from the front lines of ministry among young people and immigrants indicate, we easily see only what we believe ought to be true, capping off the ability of reality to challenge and change us. Any unjust *status quo* will persist, enabled by a selective use of reconstructed memory.

The antidote comes also in the form of memory, what the German political theologian Johann Baptist Metz called *dangerous memory*. The idea emerged from Metz's own life history. As a teenager, he served in a company of soldiers at the end of the Second World War; while he was away on an errand, all perished. After the war, as a theologian, he grappled with the *Shoah* at a time when many Germans simply wanted to forget. Thus, Metz rejected the privatized Christian faith of the modern West, which he felt cared nothing for history and proved indifferent to injustice and suffering. To Metz, Judaism had truly preserved what he called an "anamnestic culture," a "power of memory" opposed to forgetfulness (Metz, 130–131). He saw this power in the biblical stories—the exodus from slavery, release from exile, the prophets' defense of the poor and protests against injustice, and the many expressions of hope amidst suffering. The New Testament continued with it, but for Metz the heart of the matter was the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. "Yet it is true also for the faith of Christians that it not only has a remembrance, but *is* a remembrance: the memory of the suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (Metz, 131). He tied this *memoria passionis* to remembrance of all human suffering, and Metz saw the Eucharist—the paradigmatic act of Christian memory—as an embodiment of that story (Metz; Pinnock).

This kind of memory is called *dangerous* because it builds the house of faith on remembrance of other people's suffering. Metz—and the liberation and feminist theologians who adopted the perspective—saw a "culture of memory" as a critical lens of faith through which to view everything. It plies into the act of remembering—critical to Christian tradition—a powerful restlessness.

As natural as nostalgia and amnesia may be to human beings, the "anamnestic culture" Christianity has inherited from Judaism demands more from us. Until we recognize and resolve to know more of the suffering of our brothers and sisters, we cannot be satisfied in our faith.

Looking at ministry to and with the young and immigrants, Metz's approach to Christian memory challenges us not to begin with what is comfortable and familiar—with what we already know. We should not start by mining our own assumptions or fuzzy memories about our own youth or family history of migration. This does not exclude the possibility that we might have relevant experience or wisdom to offer. But we will never know what wisdom applies until we have listened to the anguish and hopes of young people and immigrants struggling

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today. That includes structured ways of listening. Many contemporary parishes have their parish surveys and town meetings, yet often no one invites the young and the newly arrived to participate. Congregational studies seek even more data through interviews, informal focus groups, census statistics, and structured observation. Yet many scholars and ministers mistakenly believe that the unstable, transient lives of young people and immigrants do not allow for methods like these. In truth, however we decide to listen, flexibility and creativity can make it work. My bigger fear, however, is that such presumed obstacles function as excuses. I worry we do not listen to marginal people because we already assume we know what they would say.

Second, we need to return to the stories of our tradition—especially the relevant stories about God’s care for the young, the poor, and strangers. Many of these stories are well known to us, from the surprising wisdom of the youthful prophet

Daniel to St. Benedict demanding the stranger be welcomed as Christ. The U.S. bishops’ pastoral letters on immigration, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us* (2000) and *Strangers No Longer* (2002)—the latter written with the Mexican bishops—have collected many of the less familiar stories on welcoming the stranger. All these stories remind us that much of the Gospel is, as Metz said, a *memoria passionis*, a remembrance of others’ suffering and the call that emerges from that. Such a remembrance drums into us a hermeneutic of compassion.

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Only after these engagements do we turn to our own recollections and experience. Armed with a hermeneutic of compassion and acknowledging that all memories remain partial and incomplete, we approach our own reminiscences cautiously, both as individuals and in our families and communities. Did my immigrant ancestors really pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, or is that just a perspective introduced by an individualistic culture that values the self-made man and woman? How independent (or out-and-out rebellious) was I really in my youth? Did that really constitute a necessary stage in life, was it a peculiarly (U.S.) American custom, or perhaps a sign of the era in which I grew up?

Even if we find our memories essentially intact and accurate, they do not determine the way we minister. Often in our encounters with people, we find instead that their stories and the stories of our tradition relativize our own remembrances and experience. This happened to Jesus as well. When he heard the testimony of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28, he changed his mind. He found the connection between her story of faith and the in-breaking of God’s reign more compelling than anything he thought he remembered about the limits of his mis-

sion to his own people. In the same way for us, the dangerous memory of the gospel message coincides with the needs and concerns of young people and our nation's newest residents. That compels us more powerfully than even the considered stories of our own youth and family history. In this way, the gospel calls us to much more than what we have *always known*.

If only we can remember that.

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